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SUBJECT: COSTA RICA: MEDRETE TREATS NEARLY 1000 PATIENTS IN
PUNTA BURICA REGION

REF: SAN JOSE 0003

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On 25-27 September 2008, Honduran-based Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B) and Costa Rican medical personnel conducted a Medical Readiness Training Exercise (MEDRETE) in Costa Rica's remote Punta Burica region on the south eastern border with Panama. The Embassy coordinated the event and contributed six translators to help non-Spanish speaking U.S. doctors communicate with their patients. This event follows a MEDRETE conducted late last year in the Talamanca region of Costa Rica (reftel) and was the first-ever conducted near the border with Panama. Nearly 1000 people, both Costa Ricans and Panamanians, received much-needed medical treatment. Four patients were medevac'd by U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopters to a nearby hospital. Three members of the national legislature, one a medical doctor and one a dentist, also participated. Food donated by Embassy personnel was airlifted to the sites. Visiting the treatment centers, the Ambassador was interviewed by national print and television media, which focused on the positive contributions of the U.S. to this joint humanitarian mission. Local leaders and patients expressed their appreciation for the help and told us that it "was like a dream come true." END SUMMARY.

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FIRST MEDICAL ASSISTANCE TO AREA IN YEARS

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¶2. (U) This MEDRETE to the Punta Burica region was the first medical assistance from any source that its inhabitants had seen in more than two years. Access to the zone is extremely difficult due to rough terrain and the lack of roads. The closest Costa Rica city is Golfito, on the Golfo Dulce near the Osa Peninsula. Without evacuation assistance, even "emergency" patients have at least a three-hour trip by horseback to the nearest medical facilities, which are actually in Panama. Even in those facilities, assistance is not guaranteed.

¶3. (U) JTF-B doctors and nurses, with some Costa Rican counterparts, treated patients, with Embassy staff translating for the JTF-B staff, allowing them to understand and treat long-running conditions. For example, one 16-year old patient who had been suffering from chest pains and fainting spells for some time received a diagnosis of an irregular heartbeat (cardiac arrhythmia). Most common ailments found by the JTF-B team were parasites, skin infections (as a result of living in a humid climate), diarrhea, and respiratory infections.

¶4. (U) The last time a dentist had visited the Punta Burica area was five years ago, according to locals receiving oral exams. Patients of all ages received dental exams, with cavities being the major problem found. JTF-B and Costa

Rican dentists also performed tooth extractions and fillings.

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A DREAM COME TRUE

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¶15. (U) The local population in Punta Burica welcomed the assistance with open arms and open hearts. Many patients and local elders told us they "thought the day would never come" when they would see the U.S. help arrive. One of the leaders said that it truly was a "dream come true."

¶16. (U) The sight of U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopters also drew large crowds everywhere they flew and landed. Each time the UH-60s shut down at the village sites and staging zones, the crews happily conducted tours for locals. Colorfully-clad indigenous women and children seemed most fascinated with the helicopters and couldn't thank us enough for our assistance.

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MEDRETE HIGHLIGHTS U.S.-COSTA RICAN COOPERATION

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¶17. (U) The MEDRETE, which took place in two separate sites in the Punta Burica region (Alta Carona and La Pena) included the participation of 36 JTF-B medical and support personnel and nearly 40 Costa Rican medical personnel. Coordinated by Post's Office of Defense Representative (ODR), MEDRETE medical professionals evaluated and treated 942 people from both Costa Rica and Panama in this isolated and depressed region. Many patients were from the indigenous communities. Four patients were airlifted for further treatment to a

nearby hospital. Three of the evacuated patients needed pre-natal care and one patient needed treatment for a severe skin condition.

¶18. (U) We coordinated with many GOCR agencies to make this MEDRETE happen, but most importantly with the GOCR's Caja Social (similar to the U.S. Social Security Administration, but they also administer all of the public hospitals in Costa Rica). The Golfito-area Caja Social physicians welcomed the MEDRETE, helped with the planning and supported it with many medical personnel. The Caja Social even advertised the event in local media, something Embassy Locally-Employed Staff could not remember ever happening before. A wide range of other GOCR agencies helped make this event happen, including the Ministries of the Presidency, Public Security, Health, Civil Aviation, and Immigration.

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LEGISLATORS TREAT PATIENTS; VIPS OBSERVE

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¶19. (U) Similar to the unusual example of bipartisan cooperation we observed last December, two of the three legislators that visited the MEDRETE sites, Federico Tinoco, PLN (a dentist) and Orlando Hernandez, opposition PAC (a medical doctor), also participated, with both of them rolling up their sleeves and treating several patients. Olivier Jimenez, the Golfito-based PLN legislator who represents the region, accompanied Tinoco and Hernandez for a brief visit to the site on September 26.

¶110. (U) Several senior members of the GOCR also visited the MEDRETE sites during a "VIP visit" on September 26, including the Minister of Public Security (MPS) Janina Del Vecchio, MPS Vice-Ministers Jose Torres and Ana Duran, and the National Chief of Police Erick Lacayo. The Ambassador, along with the DCM and POLOFFs, accompanied the GOCR delegation.

¶111. (U) In addition to the support for the MEDRETE, JTF-B helicopters ferried several hundred pounds of food donated by the U.S. Embassy community. The food included basic staples such as rice, beans and salt. The cooperation between various USG and GOCR entities, as well as with some private enterprises that provided the use of an airstrip that

facilitated the VIP visit on September 26, was excellent.

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EMBASSY ENGINEERS POSITIVE MEDIA COVERAGE

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¶12. (U) Thanks to closely coordinated efforts of the Embassy Public Affairs Section (who facilitated the transportation of journalists to one of the MEDRETE sites as well as coverage), prominent media organizations reported this event. Four national television channels and one local channel (6, 7, 11, and 42; and 14) devoted prime-time stories to the MEDRETE. Their stories focused on the medical needs of the community as well as provided the Costa Rican national audience a positive view of U.S. military humanitarian assistance. Additionally, the most widely read daily, Diario Extra, and the most respected daily, La Nacion, ran comprehensive features. One other national daily, La Prensa Libre, and a regional daily, Estrella del Sur, also had positive coverage.

(Details and the actual press coverage of the MEDRETE have been sent to WHA/CEN and SOUTHCOM.) Spanish-language interviews of Ambassador Cianchette, ODR Chief Commander Camacho, and several of the JTF-B medical professionals figured prominently in the television coverage.

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COMMENT

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¶13. (SBU) The importance of this second MEDRETE in less than a year in Costa Rica cannot be overemphasized, both in terms of real medical benefits to an isolated local population as well as to the positive image of the United States. While bureaucratic hurdles to conduct MEDRETEs remain burdensome, the Costa Rican national leadership is firmly behind this type of humanitarian assistance from DoD. Facing a last minute curve-ball from the Colegio de Medicos (the AMA equivalent), which set impossible-to-meet standards to "certify" the JTF-B physicians to treat patients in Costa Rica, President Arias himself intervened, approving the MEDRETE based on humanitarian needs.

¶14. (SBU) The Caja Social's leadership was most instrumental in making this event happen. Far from being "forced" on Costa Rica, this MEDRETE was to a great extent, a Costa Rican show, conducted at their request and supported outstandingly by JTF-B. In fact, opposition PAC legislator (and doctor) Hernandez hoped we might be able to conduct a MEDRETE in his province (Cartago) in the Turrialba area, another very poor area with limited lines of communication. U.S. MEDRETEs are clearly "treating" attitudes as well as patients in Costa Rica!

¶15. (SBU) This MEDRETE built upon the foundation laid by last December's successful event (reftel) and resulted in even more goodwill towards the United States and the Embassy in Costa Rica. While Costa Rica is relatively more developed than the rest of Central America, it still has areas of extreme need, and we can help to meet those needs. The assistance provided was deeply appreciated by the patients and the GOCR. The overall results are fully in keeping with USG and SOUTHCOM "soft power" goals for Costa Rica and the region. We hope to continue the success of this military humanitarian assistance in Costa Rica in 2009.

¶16. (U) Post sends a special thank you to the great men and women of JTF-B who made it all happen. We appreciate their outstanding support and medical professionalism, which will benefit both patients and USG goals in the region. Kudos for a job very well done!

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